

A Subaltern's Quest for Identity and Respect: A Gramscian Study of 'Our Lady of Alice Bhatti'

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Abstract

The research paper attempts to probe the resistance of subaltern against the institutionalized oppression of the capitalist society shown in the novel of '*Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*' by Mohammad Hanif. The researcher applies the theory of Gramsci to explore the abject condition, suppression and subsequent resistance of subaltern class. This novel gives voice to the oppressed, suppressed and wretched minority of Pakistani society. Alice Bhatti, the

protagonist is in many ways a subaltern. She is a Christian in Muslim majority society; she lives in the French colony in the slums of Karachi, she is a woman in the patriarchal society. This novel shows the struggle and resilience of the protagonist. She fought against triple marginalization: She resists against poverty, she resists against patriarchy, she resists against religious fundamentalism, she resists against the bourgeoisie class. Mohammad Hanif produces a subaltern who speaks, who struggles, and who fights against the system. In the end, she is crushed by the ruthless hands of the system. Her death by acid is a cry of a subaltern against inhuman suppression.

Keywords: Subaltern, Patriarchy, Identity, Bourgeoisie Class, Gramscian Analysis.

1. Introduction

In the field of criticism, the term Subaltern is used for the population, which is geographically, socially and politically outside of the Hegemonic power structure. The term is coined by an Italian thinker Antonio Gramsci, to identify the groups that are excluded from the established order of the society. Identity is a very important and much-debated term in post-colonialism. Alice Bhatti is enmeshed by her surroundings, and pressure of the society and hegemony. Who am I? Where I come from? And what is my exact role in this society? are the questions from inside and outside, she faced many times. She finds herself as an alien in the society which does not own her. She faces despair and loneliness throughout her life span. The researcher traces the journey of Alice Bhatti. She struggles to find her identity. She fights for respect and honor. She has been marginalized. She never accepts the strategy of hiding identity to get some meager respect in the hostile society. She is a subaltern, but she is a speaking subaltern, who can retaliate and inflict the pain back to the suppressor. The binaries and their contradictions perplexed the Heroine of the novel and cause identity crises

in her deeper soul. The novel *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* was published in 2011. Its setting is present-day Karachi and a tale is told about a Catholic Nurse, who lives in the French colony, which is a raw settlement. Hanif is the best Pakistani novelist in the English language. His work is fused with history and culture. He explores how a human being self-negotiates with institutions of the state religion in contemporary Pakistani society. He presents social and political dilemmas, which are smeared with witty repartee. It not only keeps the story fresh, and the reader engaged, but also offers the treasured insights into the multifaceted cultural environment of our society. Hanif novels have been translated in more than sixteen languages up till now. He has become a very popular novelist in the country. We can compare his fiction to that of our great short story writer Sadat Hassan Manto.

2. Problem Statement

Pakistan soon after independence falls into the lap of capitalism. Society has lost its spiritual color, the grace of humanity and the sense of equality. Mohammad Hanif registered the havocs society has been facing after becoming materialistic. The researcher conducts an investigation to record the journey of a subaltern in the unjust system. Alice is a brave subaltern who faces spiritual agonies and physical tortures. Her complete annihilation at the end questions the capitalist unjust system.

3. Research Objectives

The main objective of the article is to find out the journey of a subaltern in archetypal capitalist society shown in the novel *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* by Mohammad Hanif.

A capitalist society is always divided into two classes, and the powerful class suppresses the rights of the downtrodden class. Marginalization is done by the Centre.

4. Research Questions

1. How does Muhammad Hanif display the subaltern's quest for identity and honor in the unjust capitalist society through the novel *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*?
2. How is a subaltern suppressed unjustly in a capitalist society shown in the novel, *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*?

5. Literature Review

The researcher conducted a review of the related articles and research work from different sources. Different Authors studies *our lady of Alice Bhatt* from a variety of perspectives. *Silencing of Subaltern in Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*, Abroo Nazar explores feminism in the novel. He found that women in Pakistani Literature are shown as a victim of cultural, social and religious violence. They suffered from the cruel hand of the Patriarchal system. In the paper: "The Empire Writing Back: Contemporary Pakistani Novel in English" by Fatima Hassan, taken the stance that postcolonial writers are producing worthy work in English. They give voice to their respective societies. They are successfully using the language of their former masters. They are writing for their identity and nationality.

In another research paper, *Praetorianism in A Case of Exploding Mangoes: A Critical Analysis* by Muhammad Yar Tanvir, investigates the political circumstances of Pakistan around the 1980s. Zia is presented as a powerful dictator who controls every institution of Pakistan by force. He was killed in an air crash near Bahawalpur, he was a ruthless and cruel dictator.

In the current research, the researcher's contribution is to investigate the novel *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* from a new perspective. The researcher probes the resistance of subalterns against the capitalist society in the novel *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*. The researcher

traces the journey of the subalterns' quest for identity. In the end Alice complete annihilation questions the unjust system of capitalism in Pakistan.

6. Significance of the study

The researcher has found the research available on Muhammad Hanif lacks the exploration of a subaltern's quest for identity and respect. This research is important because it not only highlights the sufferings of the subaltern class, but it also explains the subaltern's resistance against the institutionalized oppression of the capitalist society. It questions the unchecked, unjust systems in the country, which are needed to be revised and reorganized on humanitarian grounds.

7. Theoretical Framework

To conduct the study, textual shreds of evidence have been collected to explore the resistance of subalterns against the capitalist society in the novel *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* by Muhammad Hanif. The researcher applies the theory of Antonio Gramsci to explore the abject condition, suppression, and subsequent resistance of the class of subalterns. Gramsci is an Italian Neo-Marxist theorist and politician. He used to write on political theory, sociology and the role of languages. One of the Gramsci's ideas was the concept of "*Hegemony*" Under the light if this concept, Antonio Gramsci says upper classes rule over lower classes through a specific ideology. When one ideology dominates, it suppresses all ways of explaining reality. To him, always popular ideology is set by ascendant class in order to exploits the poor ones in society. Peter Barry in his famous book *Beginning Theory* writes, Althusserian distinction is closely related to the notion of hegemony, which was given prominence by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1891-1934). Gramsci contrasts rule, which is direct political control, which uses force when necessary, and hegemony, which is (as defined by Raymond

Williams) 'the whole lived social process as practically organized by specific and dominant meanings, values and beliefs of a kind which can be abstracted as a "world-view" or "class outlook"' (Williams, *Marxism and Literature* Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 101).

Gramsci an Italian thinker criticizes the capitalist society which is a class-based system. In a capitalist society, the main element is the capital. Everybody struggles in order to get more capital. Who owns capital try to maintain the system in which they are the beneficiaries. To maintain their system they use two ways, consent, and coercion. To take consent they produce hegemony.

Gramsci in *Prison Notebook* propounds that "Hegemony means the dominant ideology, which protects the interest of dominant and ruling class in the society in the guise of protector of all persons' interests. Hegemonic ideology appears to be common sense is internalized by most people as "the only way of running society" (p. 280).

They use ruthless coercion when nothing is achieved through myths. Marx was sure that capitalist structure will be destroyed by its class divisions; it is inevitable that oppressed and depressed classes will rise and reform the system, it is unstoppable. But Gramsci disagrees stating that: "state actively forges a class compromise to defuse revolution" (Gramsci 157). Capitalism is based on "*force and consent*" (Gramsci 261). "Force is carried out by the state on behalf of capitalism and *consent* is achieved through institutions of civil society (church, unions, schools, and media) which are connected to the state by a thousand threads". "Intellectuals are the dominant group's deputies" (Gramsci 145). They work to secure:

The 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is 'historically' caused by the prestige... which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production. The apparatus of state coercive

power which 'legally' enforces discipline on those groups who do not 'consent' either actively or passively (Gramsci 145).

People think that the system is natural and it is the only way to live their lives. The poor face exploitation and injustice. When a subaltern rises and questions their right to rule and use the maximum resources, he is crushed by the ruthless hands of the system.

8. Data Analysis

"I'm a pessimist because of intelligence, but an optimist because of will."

(Antonio Gramsci p. 451)

Alice Joseph Bhatti is the central character in the novel. She has many disadvantages; she is Christian in the dominated Muslim society, she is a girl in the patriarchal society, she is a poor person in the capitalistic society, she belongs to the Bhatti cast in a caste system society where you can be hated only on the basis of your cast and she is the daughter of a sanitary worker Joseph Bhatti. The researcher traces the journey of her quest for identity and bit honor through the analysis of this novel. Her resistance to social injustices is countable. "One must speak for a struggle for a new culture, that is, for a new moral life that cannot but is intimately connected to a new intuition of life, until it becomes a new way of feeling and seeing reality" (Antonio Gramsci. 345). She has nerves to stand against the dishonest doctors in the hospital, she has faced untamed Muslim girls in the nursing school, she has a bold and mature attitude towards males. She is very devotional in her profession. She is a bold subaltern. "Revolutionaries see history as a creation of their own spirit, as being made up of a continuous series of violent tugs at the other forces of society"(selections from the Prison notebooks p.455)

Our analysis exposes the journey of a quest for the identity of this struggling figure. We trace "how does a common girl from French Colony of Choorahs fight against the

dominant system?” (p.199) it is more than an amazing fact that the French colony is well-known for its production of sanitary labors, but it gives birth to a fighter. “How can a person stand against a tyrannical system with empty stomachs and multiple frustrations?” (p.201) she is a brave character. She becomes “our lady of Alice Bhatti” through this journey. All other persons are doing their work of cleaning the shit of big houses in the city. But Alice Bhatti is not a usual person. She rises from the dirt and filth to become the lady of Mohammad Hanif. Chapter 12 of the novel deals with the upbringing of Alice. Her father is presented as an untouchable choorah. French colony is the place where starvation is revered as God’s will. She lost her mother when she was a child. She was murdered by a local rapist. She suffers from many lacking in her life. She has no identity in the society outside the French colony. She lacks the respect and honor of an ordinary human being. She fights against every misfortune. Her mother’s death makes her desire of finding herself strong. She is a product of the hegemony of the bourgeoisie class. She gets an education although it is not less than a miracle to get an education in these circumstances. It is abnormal in the French colony to give education to a daughter. Sufferings make her strong and mature enough to think about her identity. “Ordinary people on the streets, I just know. I look at their faces and then I see their dead faces, and I know how they will die.”(Hanif, P.61) she is a strong subaltern who faces intolerant Muslim girls at the nursing school, she tolerates her stay in the Borstal jail, and she faces the court and justice system of the society as a revolutionary figure. Hanif painted the biased and intolerant attitude of the society against the Christian minority. She is considered a worthless species in this established system. Her father Joseph Bhatti calls the depraved behavior of the society in these words: “These Muslims will make you clean their shit and then complain that you stink.”(Hanif p.01) she is given the title of “The Kafir Den” in nursing school. Those girls threaten her with hockey sticks and a copy of the Quran. She stands against those girls and did not give in. At the height of conflict Doctor

Pereira, Head of the Nursing School, says “Nurses might be doing God’s work but they are not supposed to bring God into their work.” (ibid 254), she bears spiritual agony and physical tortures inflicted by many agents of the system. These suffering are written and tortures are printed on the body of Alice. She has a mark of a bullet on her left cheek. She has a cut on her right eyebrow and a bite on her shoulder and stigma of cigarette on the left breast is like a printed medal. She faces the brother of nursing school Muslim girls holding guns in their hands. “Her twenty-seven years, the old body is a compact little war zone where competing warriors have trampled and left their marks.” (ibid p.256), her quest for honor and identity is challenged by the system at every step. In spite of all these setbacks she continues. Her quest is not stopped. She continues with all these wounds. She does not fear from a famous surgeon who drives her into the lockup. The patient died due to the negligence of that renowned Surgeon, but she was sent into the prison. As a witness, she speaks against the crooked doctor. But she is declared the main accused and the surgeon gets the pre-arrest bail. After release, she goes straight to the clinic of that famous surgeon. “Before the famous surgeon could shout or press the buzzer, she took a marble flowerpot from the windowsill and aimed at his head. He fainted at the first blow and thus was saved; suffering a broken nose and losing four teeth from this imported Swiss dentures.” (ibid.p. 266), she is a brave subaltern who struggles against the bourgeoisie’s injustices. She is sent to jail for twelve months for this crime against the famous surgeon. She did not give in yet. She gives the final exam of nursing from the Jail. She faces the filthy conditions of the jail with courage. The journey is painful. “Alice does not like to be like other women. She tries to maintain a nondescript exterior; she learns the sideways glance instead of looking at people directly. She speaks in practiced, precise sentences; so that she is not misunderstood.... She avoids eye contact and she never eats in public.”(ibid p. 145) Hanif’s heroine Alice is not a weak woman. These are her survival strategies. Noor says, “Alice is the kind of person who will

return a favor by saying fuck you too. Her fatal flaw is not her family background, but the total inability to say simple things like excuse me and thank you.” (Hanif P. 32) she takes help from her Jesus Christ. Christ whispers in her ears to guide her and to make her strong subaltern fighter. When she appears before the judge “she looks at the judge as if to say, how can a man so fat, so ugly, wearing such dandruff covered black robe sit in judgment on her?” (ibid.69) she continues her journey after leaving Borstal jail. She gets the opportunity to work as a junior Nurse at the Sacred Heart Hospital for all ailments. She proves herself as an earnest professional. But once Sister, Hina Alive, who is a senior nurse, consigns her night duty at VIP room where bourgeoisie lady ‘Begum Qazalbash’ is admitted. The VIP room is splendidly facilitated. Two strange men sitting at the corner of the room, they considered Alice a piece of cake. They force her for sexual activity by showing their pistol. Her experience of life makes her strong and hard to bite. She slashes his organ and leaves the man dreadfully crying in pain. She defends successfully against the crushing act of bourgeoisie members. She cares for the patients. She prays for the patients. She works hard to prove herself. “She holds the baby’s palm in both her hands and starts to pray. She prays like she never prayed before as nobody prayed before. She just conjures up her Lord Yassoo and gives it to Him. She holds him by his throat till he can’t breathe, she hangs from His robe...she accuses Him of being a deadbeat Lord leaving poor wretched girls to bring dead babies into this world.” Ibid 243-244) she marries a Muslim Teddy Butt in the hope of getting some recognition. It is another step of her journey. She knows in her heart that for identity and survival is it vital to get married to a Muslim. But at the end of the novel, she is crushed by the hands of her husband. Her husband Teddy Butt is an agent of bourgeoisie class, who suppresses, pressed and crushed an upcoming bold brave subaltern. Her quest for identity is crushed by the ruthless hands of the bourgeoisie class. Her marriage ceremony held at sea was an effort to give them an awful start of new life. But her efforts to settle

peacefully in life with junior Mr. Faisalabad Teddy Butt are a complete failure. Teddy is a reformed rapist womanizer and murderer. The act of pouring one-liter sulfuric acid on the head of Alice Bhatti is a symbolic value. All her effort to get identity is demolished by the tool named Teddy. This act gives her a ticket direct to heaven. This act shows the ruthlessness of the system. It shows that the system is so powerful and unjust. It must be changed. The system is challenged by Alice. Alice is crushed but does not suffer, as Joseph Bhatti writes, "My daughter did not suffer the pain that her estranged husband meant to cause her by pouring half a liter of Sulphuric acid on her angelic face. Instead, she ascended to heaven with our Holy Mother." (ibid.329) Hanif through her defeat shows the sternness of the system. His effort is to raise questions over the wrong system because ideas are not born naturally it is duty of an intellectual to produce alternative ideas in order to bring change in the system as Gramsci says, "Ideas and opinions are not spontaneously "born" in each individual brain: they have had a Centre of formation, or irradiation, of dissemination, of persuasion-a group of men, or a single individual, which has developed them and presented them in the political form of current reality." (Prison Notebooks, p.459)

9. Conclusion

The research has been planned to investigate the resistance of subalterns against the capitalist society, which is presented awfully in the novel *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* by Muhammad Hanif. The researcher applies the theory of Antonio Gramsci to explore the abject condition, suppression, and subsequent resistance of subaltern class. The findings of this research suggest that Alice Bhatti suffers throughout the novel because of capitalist society where subalterns are not given space to raise voice for their rights. At the end of the novel where Alice is murdered through acid is symbolically showing the dissolution of the identity by the agent of capitalist society Teddy Butt. Her horrible demise leaves many

questions on the structure of the system. Can we form a peaceful, calm and humane society? Can we get rid of these so-called class systems? The novel raises many questions for reformation and restructuring of society.

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